

# RURAL RESEARCH BRIEF

*The Latest Research from the Housing Assistance Council*

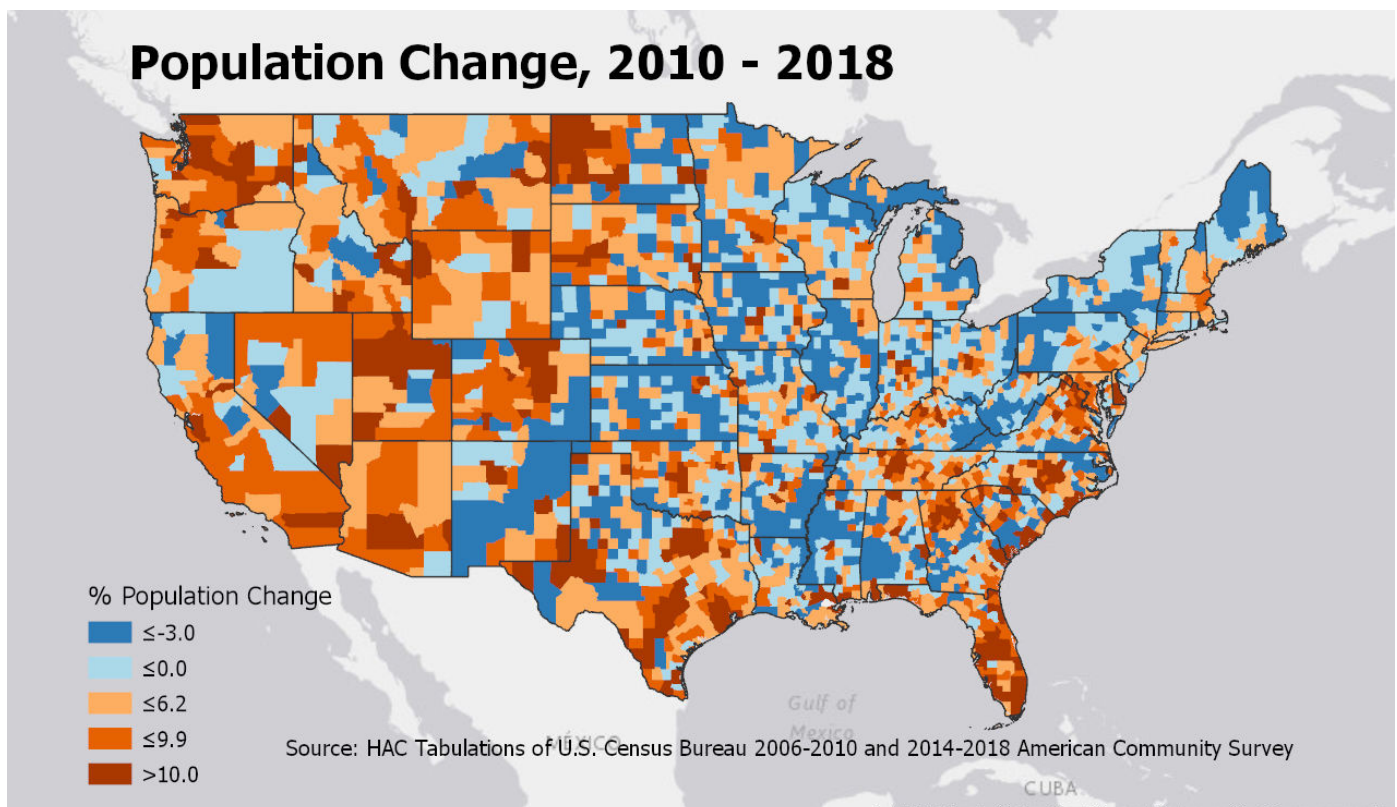


## ABOUT HAC

The Housing Assistance Council (HAC) is a national nonprofit organization that helps build homes and communities across rural America. Since 1971, HAC has provided financial products, technical assistance and training, policy formulation, and research and information services to assist community-based organizations and policy makers who are working daily to improve life in rural communities across the United States.

## Rural Population Change and Growth

Population change has been a factor in the vibrancy and vitality of rural areas for generations. Rural population decline over the past few decades is well documented, but like the rest of rural America, this trend is not monolithic and some communities are experiencing growth. Both population decline, as well as population growth, drive significant impacts in rural and small-town communities.



To view an interactive version of this map visit: <https://arcg.is/4b9fO>

## Shifting Demographics: Population Change in Rural America

There are an estimated 322.9 million people in the United States. Between 2010 and 2018 the nation's population grew 6.2 percent, or 18.9 million people. The estimated population in rural and small-town areas is 60,375,906. In the same time period, the rural population grew by less than one percent with a population gain of 446,165.

Between 2010 to 2018 there were several years where rural America experienced net population loss. From 2014-2015 rural areas lost over 10,000 people, and from 2016-2017 rural areas lost around 27,000 people. In the years where there was growth in rural areas the gains remained low, such as from 2010-2011 where rural populations increased by only 0.3 percent. On aggregate, though improved economic conditions and real estate in some rural communities near metropolitan areas have led to population growth, many rural communities have either stagnant or declining populations.

Population change includes several factors: rate of natural births, rate of natural deaths, and migration. The natural rate of population growth can be determined by calculating the difference between the numbers of births and deaths in a population, also known as the rate of natural increase.<sup>1</sup> From 2000-2010, there was an influx of migrants across all different geographies in the U.S., including in rural areas which saw dramatic growth in the rural Hispanic population.<sup>2</sup> That trend continued somewhat over the last few years as the country added 9,790,000 Hispanic individuals and rural areas saw that population increase by 19.2 percent from 2010-2018.

Suburban and exurban areas continued to have the largest population growth nationally. Between 2010 and 2018 the suburbs had an increase in population of 13,468,595 or 9.2 percent. Urban areas also grew in population. As has been the trend for the last several decades, the growth in urban and suburban areas was significantly more than in rural geographies. Population in cities grew by 5.1 percent or just over 5 million people. This continues a trend of increasing suburbanization that is consistent with the past few decades.

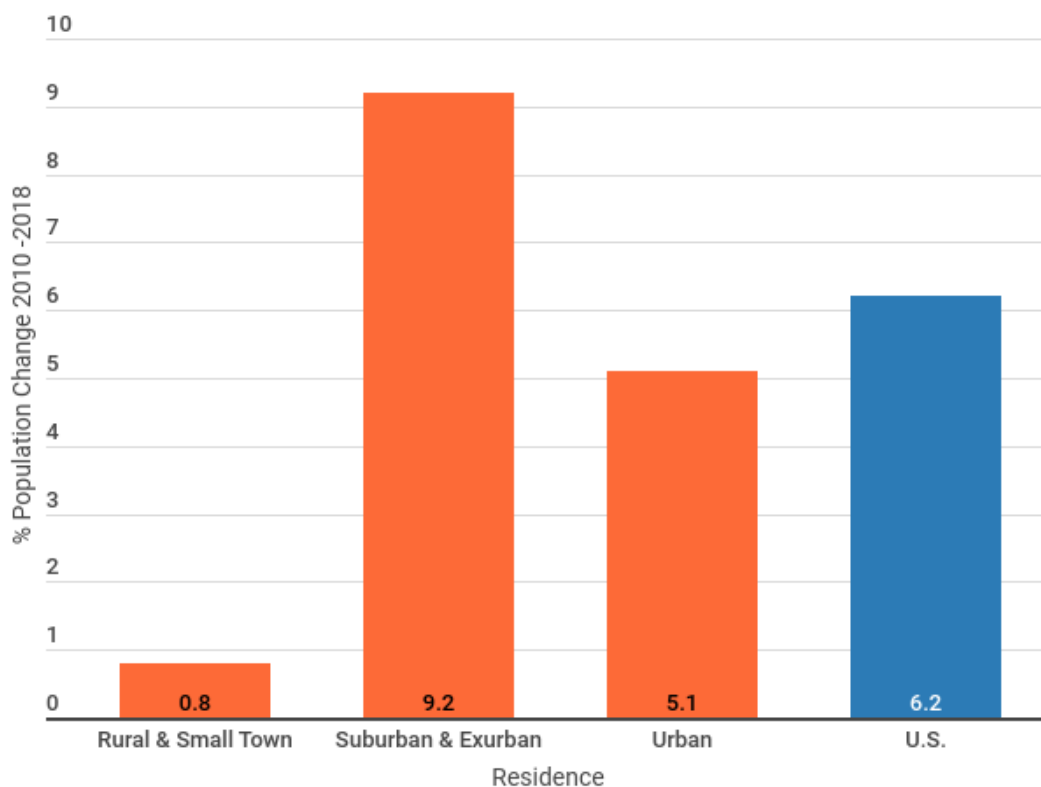
# Population Change Across the Rural Landscape

Population change was not uniform across the different nation and varied by state, geography, and residence. Between 2010 and 2018, the District of Columbia, Texas, Utah, North Dakota, and Colorado grew the most in terms of total population. Only one state, West Virginia, lost population in this time. Other states with minimal to modest population gains were Michigan, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Maine. While net migration trends have improved recently, the rate of natural population growth has continued a long-term downward trend. Some of these national trends mask great local variability. Rural communities near cities or with natural amenities are more likely to experience net in-migration, while remote areas of the country are likely to continue to see population loss.<sup>3</sup>

About half the states lost population in rural areas between 2010 and 2018, and some of those with the greatest declines included Illinois, Connecticut, New York, and West Virginia. Many of these states are in areas that have seen a consistent migration from rural to urban and suburban areas and have continuing trends of rural out migration for decades.

In contrast, many rural communities in the West gained population. States with significant recreation economies and natural amenities, or energy industries such as oil and gas, experienced rural population gain. As an example, North Dakota's rural population increased 11 percent between 2010 and 2018 and the influx of jobs in the oil industry was a likely contributor. Western states such as Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and Idaho all saw rural population gain as well.

## Population Growth, 2010-2018



To view an interactive version of this map visit: <https://infogram.com/population-change-in-the-us-2010-2018-1hzj4ogr9pgw6pw?live>



# QUICK FACTS ON RURAL POPULATION GROWTH AND CHANGE

**60.3 million**

Population in rural America

Source: U.S. Census Bureau - 2014-2018 American Community Survey

**.8%**

Rural population growth in  
percent terms between 2010-  
2018

Source: U.S. Census Bureau's 2006-2010 and 2014-2018 American Community Survey

**446,165**

Population growth in rural  
America between 2010--2018

Source: U.S. Census Bureau's 2006-2010 and 2014-2018 American Community Survey

**15.6%**

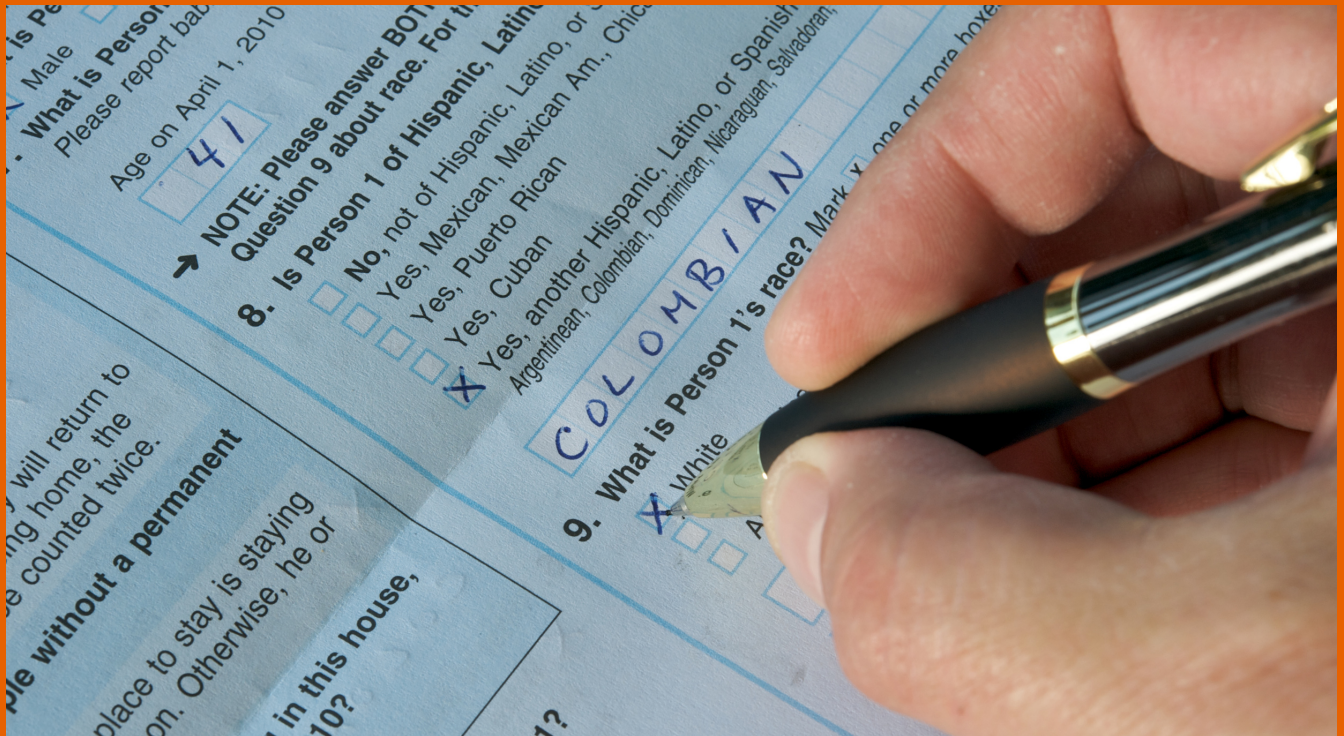
Population increase in  
Delaware—the state with the  
largest rural population  
growth between 2010-2018

Source: U.S. Census Bureau's 2006-2010 and 2014-2018 American Community Survey



*Photo courtesy of the Town of Scottsville, VA*

# CENSUS 2020 IN RURAL AND "HARD TO COUNT" COMMUNITIES



Every ten years, the United States Census Bureau enumerates the nation's total population in the states and the territories. In addition to its constitutionally mandated use for tallying seats for the House of Representatives and other civic data, the Census helps determine how over \$600 billion federal funds will be distributed to state and local organizations.<sup>4</sup> The accuracy of these data help policymakers, researchers, and practitioners understand characteristics of different populations and their needs, including those in rural communities.

Hard to Count areas are defined as populations where real or perceived barriers to data collection are pervasive, and it includes many rural and Native American communities.<sup>5</sup> Whether a household is located down a long gravel drive or on a remote coastal island, the Census Bureau is responsible for collecting their response. Often rural households do not have physical addresses, but instead rely on P.O. boxes, so Census takers go door-to-door. With the implementation of a primarily online form in 2020 for the first time, rural areas without access to broadband risk falling further behind.<sup>6</sup>

Delays in the decennial Census roll-out began before 2020, when several testing sites, including those in rural areas, were cut from the budget. The 2018 End-to-End test was designed to serve as a “dress rehearsal” for enumeration efforts, yet several site visits were cancelled including locations in West Virginia without access to broadband and at a Native American reservation in Washington state.<sup>7</sup> The coronavirus pandemic further delayed Census operations from the April roll-out, and operations began phasing back in several states in May and June of 2020 with increased health indicators.<sup>8</sup> It is unclear how these factors and developments will impact the rural census count, but the importance of accurate population counts for rural communities and residents in Census 2020 cannot be overstated.

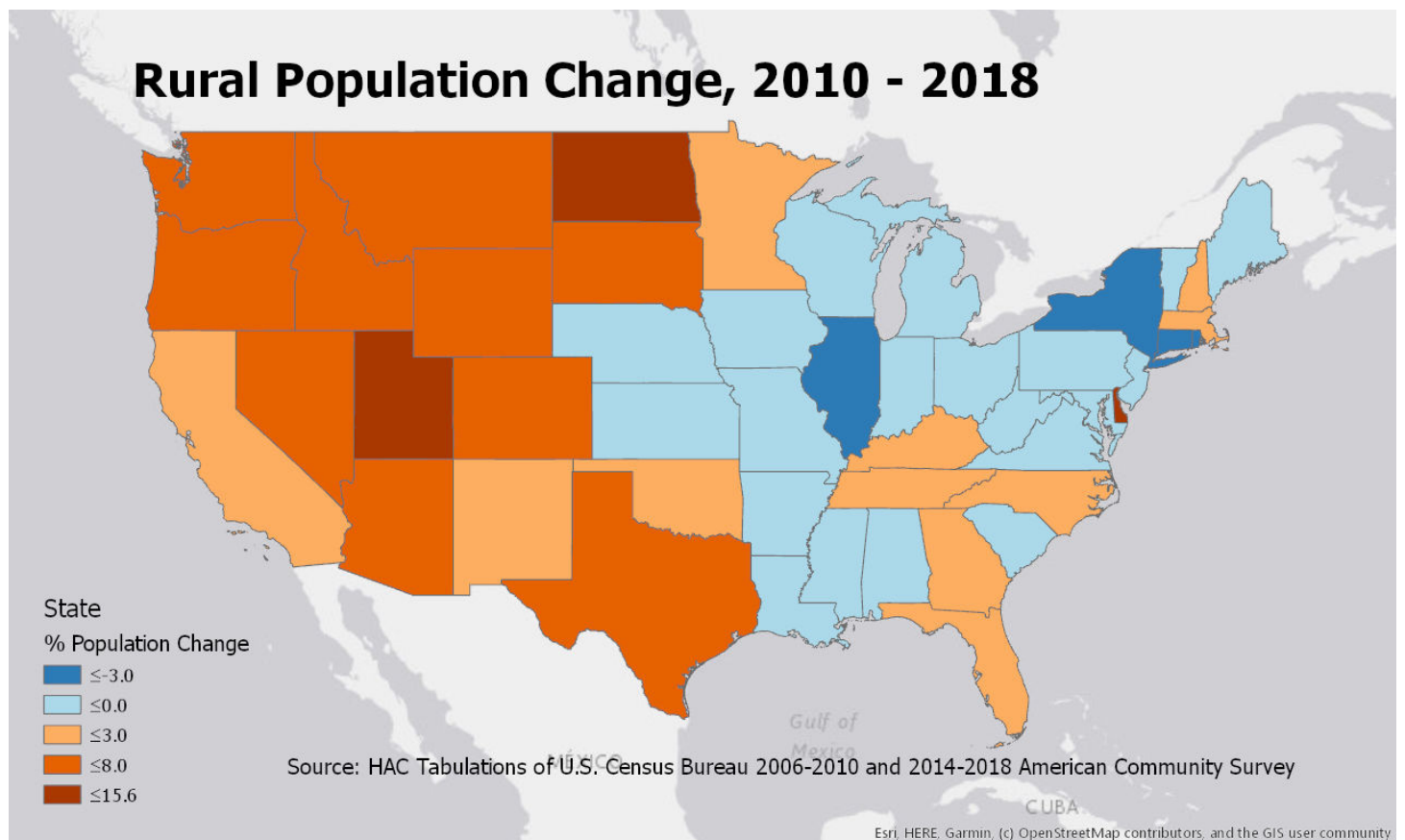


## Population Change and Ramifications for Rural Housing

Both population growth and loss factor into housing provision in rural areas. A high rate of vacant homes and an aging population are considerations for communities and policymakers working to provide decent, affordable homes in an area of significant population loss. Population impacts the foundation of planning, strategies, and policies in any community, from considerations like tax base, schools, and homelessness. All rural communities are subject to the needs of a sparse population over a large area, and if that population declines the tax base may not support rehabilitation efforts for existing housing. Without a robust housing stock, rural and small towns will struggle to rebuild their workforce. On the other hand, an influx of new residents may strain the existing affordable housing stock if prices in the area increase.



## Rural Population Growth Varied Widely Across States, But Was Highest in the West



To view an interactive version of this map visit: <https://arcg.is/0z4CGT>

## For More Information About Population Change in Rural America

01

### U.S. CENSUS BUREAU'S POPULATION ESTIMATES

<https://www.census.gov/topics/population.html>

02

### USDA ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/90556/eib-200.pdf?v=5899.2>

03

### U.S. CENSUS BUREAU'S AMERICA: A NATION OF SMALL TOWNS

<https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/05/america-a-nation-of-small-towns.html>

04

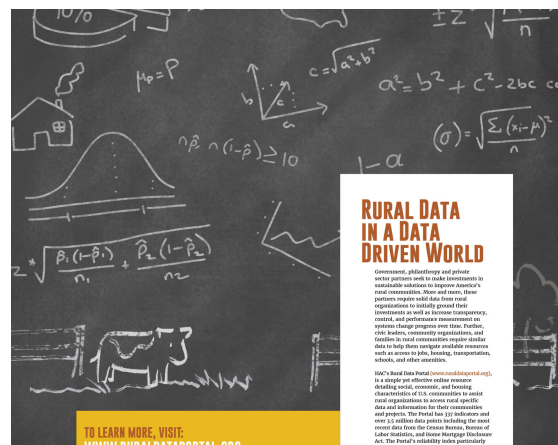
### GEORGETOWN LAW CENTER ON POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

<https://www.georgetownpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/GCPI-ESOI-Why-the-2020-Census-Matters-for-Rural-America-20181010.pdf>

## THE RURAL DATA PORTAL

### Data is Important.

The Housing Assistance Council created a searchable database that combines many disparate data sources into one easily accessible place. The Rural Data Portal is a simple, easy to use, on-line resource that provides essential information on the social, economic, and housing characteristics of communities in the United States. Access important data for your community at [www.ruraldataportal.org](http://www.ruraldataportal.org)



[WWW.RURALDATAPORTAL.ORG](http://WWW.RURALDATAPORTAL.ORG)

## About the Authors

*Evelyn Immonen is a Research and Policy Associate at the Housing Assistance Council, where she works with the Research and Information team to prepare research reports on rural housing and bridge the gap to real-world policy issues. She also represents HAC as part of the Citizens' Institute on Rural Design, a program that brings creative placemaking and design to rural areas. She recently graduated from the University of Virginia where she earned a Bachelors in English and a Master of Public Policy degree. Evelyn is particularly interested in Native American communities due to her heritage with the Turtle Mountain Tribe and connection to many tribes in North and South Dakota.*



*Keith Wiley, Ph.D. is the Senior Researcher at the Housing Assistance Council. Keith is one of the nation's foremost experts on housing data and analysis. Keith has vast experience and expertise with large scale data analysis and is an expert on GIS mapping and spatial data capabilities and platforms. Keith has conducted numerous analyses with HUD data and other federal and administrative data sets, and many Census Bureau data products. His areas of expertise include the Community Reinvestment Act, assisted and subsidized housing data analysis, Home Mortgage Disclosure Act, smart growth planning and policies, and environmental economics. Keith has been at HAC since 2009. He holds an M.A. in Public Policy from American University and a Ph.D. in Public Policy from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.*



The Housing Assistance Council (HAC) is a national nonprofit organization that helps build homes and communities across rural America. Since 1971 HAC has provided financial products, technical assistance and training, policy formulation, and research and information services to assist community-based organizations and policy makers who are working daily to improve rural housing and rural communities across the United States.



HOUSING ASSISTANCE COUNCIL

1025 Vermont Avenue, NW

Sixth Floor

Washington, DC 20005

202-842-8600

[www.ruralhome.org](http://www.ruralhome.org)



## About the Data

Most of the data for this Brief derives from Housing Assistance Council tabulations of various public use data sets including the [U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey \(ACS\)](#). For more information on these data please consult the primary data source, or contact the Housing Assistance Council at [lance@ruralhome.org](mailto:lance@ruralhome.org).

## REFERENCES

1. Teitelbaum, M. (2020, April 23). Natural increase and population growth. Retrieved June 01, 2020, from <https://www.britannica.com/science/population-biology-and-anthropology/Natural-increase-and-population-growth>
2. Housing Assistance Council (December 2011) Population Change in Rural America Research Brief, from [http://www.ruralhome.org/storage/research\\_notes/rural\\_research\\_note\\_population\\_change.pdf](http://www.ruralhome.org/storage/research_notes/rural_research_note_population_change.pdf)
3. USDA Economic Research Service. (2018, November). Rural America at a Glance: 2018 Edition. Retrieved January 31, 2020, from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/90556/eib-200.pdf?v=5899.2>
4. U.S. Census Bureau. (2020, May 26). Counting People in Rural and Remote Locations. Retrieved June 02, 2020, from <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/12/counting-people-in-rural-and-remote-locations.html>
5. U.S. Census Bureau. (2019, July). Counting the Hard to Count in a Census. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2019/demo/Hard-to-Count-Populations-Brief.pdf>
6. Brumfield, Cara (October 10, 2018) Why the 2020 Census Matters for Rural America, from <https://www.georgetownpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/GCPI-ESOI-Why-the-2020-Census-Matters-for-Rural-America-20181010.pdf>
7. Ibid.
8. US Census Bureau. (2020, March 15). COVID-19. Retrieved June 04, 2020, from <https://2020census.gov/en/news-events/press-kits/covid-19.html>  
[cid=20412%3A+census++corona++virus%3Asem.ga%3Ap%3Adm%3Aen%3A](https://2020census.gov/en/news-events/press-kits/covid-19.html)

